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Francis Donovan, Thomaston

December 12, 1938 LOCAL COLOR

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John Davis, Pleasant Street (previously interviewed)

I showed Mr. Davis the borrowed newspaper clipping concerning the Minstel Club. Said he:

"There was one before this. I guess I'm the only one left of the original club. No, I can't tell you when it was organized, but it was long before 1902. Afterwards, the old members joined this newer group. There was Wally Neuberth, and Ed Kane and Ed Spurr and myself and some others. But I guess I'm the only one left.

"We gave our shows exclusively in Thomaston. We had offers from other towns and cities, but we never accepted them. Social life was different in a good many ways years ago -- there was a great deal of interest in athletics too -- more than there is now -- young fellows these days haven't got the ambition.

"We had one of the finest track teams in the state right here in town. It was sponsored by the T A B. And most every town and city had club track teams. But I think Thomaston was more interested in athletic events even than any of the others.

"You've probably heard about the race between Billy Church and Doc Kane. Both had their backers. Billy was regarded by many as the fastest human in the valley; and Doc -- he was going to college then and making quite a name for himself--and of course the discussion between the two groups -- one for Doc and one for Billy -- led to a match. Both 2 boys agreed to a hundred yard dash, and the distance was measured off right up in the center of town one day and they went to it. Somebody put up a \$50 purse and practically the whole town turned out to watch it. There was a lot of betting too. Doc won the race by a fairly comfortable margin. Lots of people thought word of the race might get back to his school and affect his amateur standing, but it never did.

"Then one time I raced Cap Lumpkins over in Watertown for a side bet of \$100 and beat him. That was a hundred yard dash, too. It had been raining for a couple of days and we

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couldn't find any place in town suitable, so we went over there. The track was heavy, I remember.

"There were bicycle races, too -- so many times around the old Knife shop. They had entries from all over the state, mostly just for the fun of racing, but one year they gave prizes.

"And speaking of races, I'll tell you about one of the funniest ones ever held here. There was a fellow worked over in the old watch shop named John Jinks. He like to walk and run, and he had an idea he was pretty good. Now at the same time, there was a lad worked there named John Gill, who had an old broken down pacer. The horse was as stiff as a board, but when he got warmed up he could go like hell.

"Well, they fixed up a race between Jinks and the horse. It was run at 7 o'clock in the morning and damn near everybody in the shops stayed out to see it. Gill's horse was to start at the town hall and Jinks was to start at the library, which was a pretty good head start.

"The finish was over at the entrance of the watch shop. Gill had an old dilapidated buggy. Well, they started out, and Jinks ran as 3 fast as his legs would carry him, but Gill caught up to him an that little incline in front of Gus Rapp's house. He passed Jinks like he was standing still and went flying on down the hill towards the watch shop. And just as he got to the finish line the damn buggy fell apart.' Jinks was madder than hell. If the thing had broken down any place else he'd have won the race."

[I asked Mr. Davis (who spent part of his lengthy service with the company in the old watch shop), about the journeymen watchmakers. There were many of them, he said, "but for the most part they were chiselers. They came here from Waltham and Elgin and other watch factories but a lot of them didn't know much about the business and got by on the names of the factories they came from. Just because they'd worked in those places they were supposed to be good. And they didn't start making good watches here till they'd got the

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home town boys and girls broken in on the different operations.?) "But [if?] you'd worked in Seth Thomas in those days, you could get a job in most any clock or watch factory. To be able to say you were a Seth Thomas man was as good a recommendation as you'd want. I worked in Trenton, myself, for the Ingersoll people, and same of the other lads from town went down there. start

"Then I worked for the old New England Company in Waterbury, when it was in the hands of the receivers. Then I came back here. I went to work in the metal case department. John Woods was superintendent then and his son was assistant. They had a man called Holy Joe who was foreman 4 [of the pendulum department. Gave him that nickname because he was so religious. I forget his last name. He had charge of all those old calendar clocks they used to make.?) "Did I know Charley Norton? I used to work for him. Charley Norton. He was a brilliant man. A. M. Gordon succeeded him in the tower clock department. In Norton's time they used to wind the tower clocks with a big crank, but Gordon perfected the electric wind. " I remember the big Centennial tower clock. The frame of the movement was from here to that door, easy. They had it set up in the shop, and the pendulum ball hung down three floors. I don't know what became of it after they brought it back. They had two movements in the Colgate clock -- one for the time works and the other for the dial -- on account of the monstrous big hands. But those movements were no bigger than the top of that stove. " When I first went to work in the watch shop, there was a Mexican monk came around with a model watch he had made. He was going around to the different watch shops to find out where he could get it done cheapest and best. Father [donahue?] brought him over to the shop -- he couldn't speak a word of English and Father Donahue talked to him in Latin -- and acted an interpreter. " By touching something on this watch of his, it would strike the minutes and hours. He made it for the use of the monks -- you know it's kind of dark in the cloisters and they can't see so good to tell time, I suppose. 5 " Mr. Higginbotham, who was superintendent, said it was the nicest piece of work, considering the crude tools used, that he'd ever seen. This monk

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had nothing [by?] but handsaws and files and a little hand turning machine to work with. I suppose he had studied other watch movements and picked up the mechanics himself.

“He was amazed at the modern methods of watch manufacture that Mr. Higginbotham showed him. Anyway, they didn't make his watches for him here. I imagine he probably had to go to Switzerland in the end, where they specialize in that kind of intricate work.

“This Mr. Higginbotham was a brilliant watchmaker. He used to be called to Washington by the government as a kind of judge when some question of patent rights came up. And don't let anybody tell you they didn't make good watches here. Once the government held a contest to see which were the most suitable watches for use in their observatories, and they accepted so many watches from each of the big companies. Seth Thomas came third. end

[“They made watches as high as 25 jewels -- everything was jeweled. I don't know what they got for them. They bought their jewels at first, and then they began to make them. They used to get garnets, and diamonds and sapphires, turn 'em with diamond points and drill them with diamond drills. Then they discontinued this process and began to buy them again.

“Another good watchmaker was Fred Bolds. He knew more about a watch, and could spot defects quicker than any man I ever knew. He had 6 charge of the training room and jewelry work. They say during the war he made a time fuse that was the best the government ever had. He went from here to Trenton and then to Chelsea.”?]